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The Kimono Craze: From Exoticism to Fashionability

Elizabeth Kramer and Akiko Savas

The opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade in the 1850s brought the country's arts, including the kimono, into the global spotlight. Over the subsequent decades a number of factors contributed to the increased availability and fashionable appeal of kimono beyond Japan's shores. Upper- and middle-class women in Britain, Europe and America purchased this garment in such numbers that, by the early twentieth century, there was a complete craze for kimono fashion.

The international exhibitions provided eager consumers with their first glimpse of Japan and its artistic wares. Sir Rutherford Alcock (1809–1897), Britain's first diplomatic representative in Japan, organized the Japanese display at the 1862 International Exhibition in London. The textiles shown either inspired curiosity as ethnographic objects, or were valued as specimens of manufacture,¹ but it was the garments worn by members of a Japanese delegation who visited the exhibition that caused the real sensation.² Although their samurai attire was sober in appearance, it was seen to be of particular interest to fashion-conscious female viewers.³ The inclusion of a display featuring three Japanese women in a teahouse at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867 brought kimono firmly into fashionable relief (KIM123).⁴ The display drew huge crowds, as described in the diary of one Japanese official:

In the [teahouse] three young women, named Kane, Misu and Sato, are sitting quietly and gracefully on show. As not only their clothes and jewellery are unusual, but also the advent of oriental women in the West is hitherto unheard of, Westerners crowded in front of the house in order to have a good look at them and gaze at them with glasses. As the floors are covered with straw mats the public is not allowed in and therefore cannot approach them too closely. However, people swarm to the place continuously and not a few are unable to see them easily.⁵

This spectacle fired the imagination of fashion designers. That same year a 'Half-Length Ballroom Coat in the Japanese Style', which had wide sleeves and crossed over the front of the body like a kimono, was illustrated in a French women's magazine.⁶ In addition to the adoption of the kimono form, kimono fabric was sometimes cut up and used to make women's dresses. This is seen in a tailored gown that London dressmakers the Misses Turner re-fashioned from a garment that would have originally been made for a high-ranking samurai woman (KIM124).⁷

The new Meiji government was quick to recognize the opportunities offered by the international exhibitions to promote Japan's artistic products and evaluate the potential of the export market, and in 1873 participated in the Weltausstellung, or World Exposition, in Vienna. The successful marketing of Japan's applied arts overseas was pivotal to the country's goal of strengthening its economic power and reversing the unequal treaties imposed upon it (ch.10). Textiles formed the backbone of these exports and included embroidered ornamental screens, wall hangings and framed panels designed to appeal to foreign



KIM123
THREE JAPANESE WOMEN IN THE PARIS INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION
Illustrated London News,
 16 November 1867
 V&A, National Art Library

KIM124
DAY DRESS
 Misses Turner
 Figured satin silk (*rinzu*),
 hand-painting in ink (*kaki-e*),
 stencil imitation tie-dyeing
 (*surihitta*) and embroidery in
 silk and metallic threads
 Probably Kyoto, 1800–50;
 tailored in London, 1876–8
 Kyoto Costume Institute,
 AC8938-93-28-1AB

KIM125
AT HOME GOWN FOR EXPORT
 Shiino Shobey Silk Store,
 founded 1859
 Quilted plain weave silk,
 embroidery; belt of silk cord
 (*kumihimo*)
 Japan, about 1875
 Kyoto Costume Institute,
 AC13032 2013-23-1AB
 Gift of Shiino Hidesato

KIM126
TEA GOWN FOR EXPORT
 Silk taffeta (*seigou*), crepe silk
 and embroidery
 Japan, about 1895; probably
 retailed by Liberty's of
 London
 Kyoto Costume Institute,
 AC6993 91-12-14



consumers. Soon no fashionable nineteenth-century home could be without such items.⁸ Silk itself became the new nation's most important and valuable export. Japan had begun exporting raw silk and silkworms to Europe in the 1850s, when the pébrine epidemic decimated European silk production. By the end of the Meiji period, Japan was exporting nearly 10,000 tons of raw silk, which, combined with the finished fabrics it sold abroad, made it the largest silk exporter in the world.

One of the representatives sent to the Vienna exhibition by the Meiji government to investigate the European market was Shiino Shōbei (1839–1896), an enterprising silk merchant who had established a store in Yokohama in 1859, the year the treaty port was established.⁹ The cut and constriction of European clothing presented something of a challenge in a country used to straight seams. With the mastering of such tailoring skills, however, Japanese designs and methods were adapted to the creation of garments aimed at foreigners visiting Japan and at the export market. Shiino was one of the most successful purveyors of such clothing and this 'At Home' gown was probably made by his firm (KIM125). The brown quilted silk and colourful embroidery are distinctly Japanese, but other features make it desirable to a foreign consumer, including the fashionable bustle, pocket, and frog closures and tasselled belt that secure the garment. Kimono, kimono-styled fashions, parasols and other silk accessories were exported internationally from Yokohama and Kobe. While kimono themselves became very popular items, often to wear as a kind of fancy dress, kimono styles were also incorporated into the everyday wear of women in Britain, Europe and America. At Home gowns, which included morning gowns, tea gowns and dressing gowns, were of a loose rather than precise fit and hence suited to private spaces. They did not require the complicated sewing techniques of fully tailored gowns and were thus simpler for Japanese artisans to create.¹⁰

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the kimono was of particular interest to those with idealistic social or political views. Between the 1870s and 1890s British dress reformers warned that the unnatural appearance of fashionable dress, achieved through the use of corsets, was as ugly as it was dangerous. Historic costume, such as classical or medieval clothing, was looked to for solutions, as were the draped forms of dress encountered through European imperialism. A tea gown, a fashionable dress worn while entertaining guests at home, demonstrates how such eclectic influences were drawn together to create a refined, rather than ostentatious, garment (KIM126). Made in Japan in the mid-1890s and embellished with embroidered chrysanthemums, it features a long, flowing form and pendulous sleeves reminiscent of both Japanese *furisode* and medieval and later European gowns."

The tea gown was the kind of garment available for purchase at Liberty & Co. of London. This famous store was established by Arthur Lasenby Liberty (1843–1917) in 1875 and from its foundation sold Asian textiles, including kimono and Chinese robes (KIM127).¹² In addition to imported items, Liberty's began



KIM128
ELLEN TERRY WEARING A KIMONO
 Samuel Alex Walker (1841
 1922)
 London, about 1874
 V&A, S.133: 418-2007
 Bequeathed by Guy Little

Oposite

KIM127
KIMONO FOR A WOMAN
 Figured satin silk (*rinzu*),
 freehand paste-resist dyeing
 (*yūzen*) and embroidery in
 silk and metallic threads
 Japan, 1850–90; retailed by
 Liberty's of London
 V&A, 874-1891

to market its own ‘artistic fabrics’ based on Asian precedents. Its wares attracted the attention not only of collectors and artists, but also of middle-class women, eager to demonstrate their taste in pursuit of a lifestyle inspired by the ‘art for art’s sake’ doctrine of the Aesthetic Movement. Late nineteenth-century women’s journals reveal that certain elements of the movement, especially with regard to dress and interior decoration, were increasingly gaining attention. *The Woman’s World* praised ‘Liberty’s art fabrics and harmoniously coloured tea gowns’ and declared the establishment to be ‘the chosen resort of the artistic shopper’.¹³ In 1884 Liberty & Co. established a Costume Department under the direction of design reformer E.W. Godwin. Godwin was an early admirer of Japanese art and it profoundly impacted **upon** his design practice. Japanese prints were to be found hanging on his walls by 1862, and he and his partner, the actress Ellen Terry, dressed their children in kimono.¹⁴ Terry marked her own unconventional lifestyle sartorially by donning kimono herself, as the actor Johnston Forbes-Robertson noted when recalling his first visit to Terry’s home (**KIM128**).¹⁵

The floor was covered with straw-coloured matting, and ... above the dado were white walls, and the hangings were of cretonne, with a fine Japanese-pattern in delicate grey-blue ... Presently the door opened, and in floated a vision of loveliness! In a blue kimono and with that wonderful golden hair, she seemed to melt into the surroundings and appeared almost intangible. This was my first sight of Miss Terry.¹⁶

Exotic settings through which **imperialist** or Orientalist themes were explored had long been a feature of European theatre, and in the late nineteenth century a number of popular productions brought a vision of ‘exotic’ Japan to a wide audience. Kimono first appeared on-stage in Paris in 1870 at the Théâtre de Goethe, shortly after the 1867 Exposition.¹⁷ In London, the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera *The Mikado*, a satirical take on British institutions and politics disguised as Japanese, opened at the Savoy Theatre in 1885 to great acclaim and was subsequently widely performed in theatres around Britain and America (**KIM129**). For the original production Liberty supplied the kimono for the female roles and the material for the male costumes. The theatre programme carried an advertisement for the store’s Art Fabrics, serving to emphasize the fashionable link between kimono on-stage and off. Indeed, product names such as ‘Mikado’ and ‘Pitti Sing’ (one of the ‘three little maids’ featured in *The Mikado*) were derived from well-known theatrical productions about Japan, as demonstrated in a 1909 Harrod’s advertisement for its dressing gowns (**KIM131**). George Edwardes’ *The Geisha* was another incredibly successful musical comedy, first performed at Daly’s Theatre in 1896 (**KIM261**, KIM132). The review in the *Illustrated London News* declared that ‘all the spirit of Japan has been happily caught’ and that ‘the fashionable tea gown of the future will surely be a Japanese Kimono with a lovely obi’.¹⁸

Mari Yoshihara argues that white women performing identities



KIM261
**DAME MARIE TEMPEST AS
O MIMOSA SAN IN *THE GEISHA***
London, 1896
V&A, S.146:36-2007
Bequeathed by Guy Little



KIM129
**PROGRAMME FOR *THE MIKADO*,
SAVOY THEATRE**
London, 1885
V&A

KIM131
**ADVERTISEMENT FOR JAPANESE
GOWNS IN *HARRODS GENERAL
CATALOGUE***
London, 1909
Harrods Archives

other than their own in the theatre, as well as the practice of fancy dress, were important components in the empowerment and pleasure they felt as ‘New Women’ of the early twentieth century.¹⁹ Likewise, as the kimono was widely held to be ‘feminine’ and increasingly fashionable, reformers such as those involved in women’s suffrage adopted it, as well as other forms of Asian dress, ‘to soften the accusations of masculinization by opponents’.²⁰ In New York’s Greenwich Village, for example, some feminists created their own dress based on kimono and thus by ‘shifting the meaning of the kimono from a “private” costume to be worn at home to an everyday outfit suitable for public wear, feminists used their attire to challenge the gendered division between the private and public spheres.’²¹

The theatre was also ‘one of a few public spaces in which a woman could openly admire another woman’s voice and body in an atmosphere of heightened emotion and powerful sensual arousal.’²² The spectacle and beauty of these performances, in particular the costume, dominated discussion about them in the media. For example, one newspaper review of *The Geisha*, invites its women readers to:

... imagine Miss Marie Tempest in a Japanese dress of softest grey, lined with vividly beautiful blue, and all embroidered with pink and blue and white flowers, with white butterflies hovering over them, and long-legged birds with scarlet and white plumage poised gravely here and there. Her hair, a beautiful red gold for the occasion, is dressed in quaintest fashion, and fastened with gold daggers and chains – small wonder, in fact, is it that O Mimosa San is the chief attraction of Wunhi’s tea-house.²³

The kimono, as seen on-stage in late nineteenth-century Japanese-themed theatrical productions, had been worn by European actresses. Sadayakko Kawakami (1871–1946), brought the fashionability of kimono further into the limelight. This Japanese actress, who started her career as a geisha, first appeared on-stage in Paris in 1900 as part of her theatre company’s tour of Europe (KIM133). Sadayakko, in her beautiful kimono, took the city by storm, becoming a star of Parisian society and featuring in French theatre magazines and ladies’ journals. Capitalizing on her popularity, the Paris store Au Mikado began to market garments named ‘Kimono Sada Yacco’ (KIM134). Made of stencil-dyed silk, this jacket would not have been as expensive as the ‘Robe Japonaise’ sold by Parisian fashion house Babani (KIM135). Vitali Babani had moved to Paris from Istanbul in 1892, opening an establishment selling imported goods from China, Japan, India and Turkey. Embroidered kimono were specially commissioned from workshops in Kyoto and advertised in a series of staged photographs in *Le Figaro-Modes* in 1905 (KIM136). Babani continued to sell garments made in Japan, as well as fashions inspired by them, drawing customers from the European cultural milieu to the Palais des Soieries [Palace of Silks], as the establishment was christened. This purple embroidered kimono was bought in about 1916 by Jean Pouquet who, with her husband playwright Gaston Arman de Caillavet, was at the heart of French literary society.²⁴

The kimono certainly had a major impact on European fashion in the early twentieth century, something that is particularly evident in the dramatic change from the tightly corseted, wasp-waisted silhouette to a straighter, looser shape (ch.13). In 1903 *The Queen*, a leading British ladies’ journal, reported the kimono as an emerging fashion influence that was particularly linked to the French capital: ‘The Eastern note predominates everywhere, allied to that entrancing Parisian atmosphere which makes the quaintness and delicate grotesqueness of Eastern details so attractive to women of the Western world.’²⁵ Kimono imported from Japan became increasingly fashionable, marketed for the upper and middle classes and considered high-end products. In her wardrobe of cutting-edge European fashion, wealthy American socialite Emilie Grigsby (1879–1964) also had a Japanese kimono (KIM137). What is significant about her garment is that it was made in Japan specifically for export. In the late nineteenth century, the kimono initially sold in stores such as Liberty & Co., which feature so prominently in the paintings of the period, had been made in Japan for the domestic market (KIM127, KIM142,



KIM133
ACTRESS SADAYAKKO KAWAKAMI
(1871–1946)
Paris/London, 1900
Getty images

KIM134
JACKET, ‘KIMONO SADO YACCO’
Plain weave silk, stencil
dyeing
Japan, 1900–10; retailed by Au
Mikado, Paris
Kyoto Costume Institute,
AC9179–1994-92





Opposite

KIMr35

KIMONO FOR EXPORT

Silk crepe (*chirimen*) with embroidery in silk threads
Kyoto, about 1916; retailed by Babani, Paris
Palais Galliera – Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris, GAL1966.6.6
Given by Simone André-Maurois

KIMr36

**ROBE JAPONAISE D'INTERIEUR
BABANI**

Le Figaro-Modes, July 1905
V&A, National Art Library

KIMr37

KIMONO FOR EXPORT

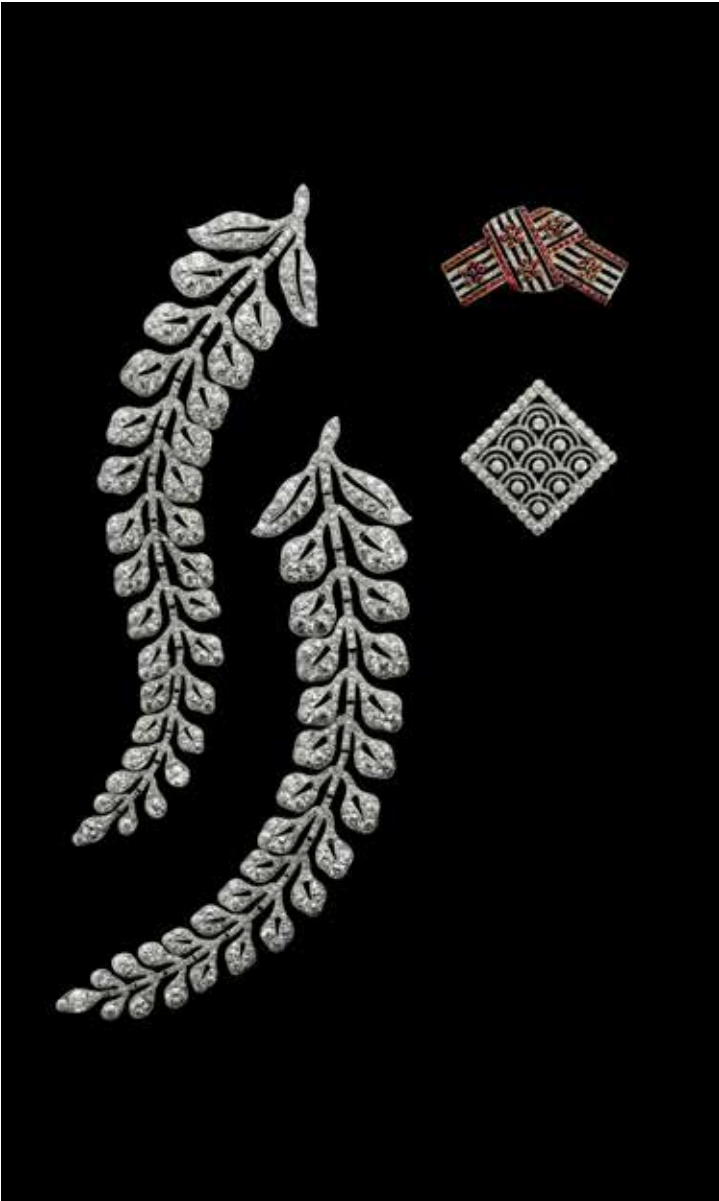
Satin silk (*shusu*), embroidery in silk threads
Probably Kyoto, 1905–15; retailed in Europe or America
V&A, T. 178-1967



KIM144, KIM145). Silk merchants such as Shiino Shōbei, on the other hand, made western-style garments for the foreign market (KIM125, KIM126). At the turn of the century things began to change as the Japanese, recognizing the commercial opportunities the ‘kimono craze’ afforded, focused increasingly on making indigenous-style garments specifically for the British, European and American markets.²⁶

Emilie Grigsby’s kimono is constructed in the same way as garments for the domestic market. By this stage in Japan, however, embroidery was no longer in vogue, with most kimono being patterned with resist-dyeing techniques (ch.10). The bold embroidery employed on Emilie’s kimono is similar to that used on the decorative hangings and screens made for export, rather than that seen in late Edo-period garments. As ever, the Japanese were responding to demand, for it was embroidered kimono such as this that reportedly sold best at the international exhibitions.²⁷ Some export garments were constructed slightly differently from indigenous kimono. The Babani garment, which like Emilie’s was made in a workshop in Kyoto, does not have the usual overlap panel of a kimono while others lack a central back seam. The production of this wider cloth was made possible by the new loom technology introduced from Europe. A more conspicuous difference seen in some export kimono is the alteration of the silhouette. Rather than being completely linear in shape, garments are flared through the addition of triangular pieces of fabric at the sides or the lower back, so that they resemble a skirt in the way they drape (KIM138). In addition, kimono for the export market often employed tassels and braided cords for decoration and had sash belts for ease of use rather than obi. This example, like Emilie Grigsby’s kimono, features embroidered birds and flowers growing up from the hem and cascading from the shoulders, the wisteria seen on both garments being a particularly popular motif at the time. The wisteria motif could also be seen on Japanese export cloisonné and on objects made in Europe and America inspired by Japan, such as Cartier jewellery, which often drew on East Asian sources (KIM158).²⁸

A number of Japanese firms produced export kimono, but the most prominent and successful was Takashimaya, which was founded in 1831 as a second-hand kimono and cotton fabric shop. Takashimaya expanded rapidly in the Meiji period, supplying goods to middle-class Japanese consumers and to the growing export market. It was Iida Shinshichi IV (1859–1944), head of the firm from 1888, who recognized the importance of direct overseas trade to the company and to the wider Japanese economy.²⁹ Until this point Japanese silk goods had been sold directly to overseas visitors to Japan, or through foreign traders in the treaty ports. In 1889 Iida toured Europe, visiting the Paris Exposition Universelle, and then went on to Britain and America. His observations led him to set up a Foreign Trade Division and establish overseas offices, including one in London in 1909.³⁰ Takashimaya’s international expansion took place at much the same time as the growing ‘kimono craze’, but this was more than a lucky coincidence. The Company was aware of market



KIM138
KIMONO FOR EXPORT
Satin silk (*shusu*), embroidery
in silk threads
Probably Kyoto, 1905–15;
retailed in Europe or
America
V&A, FE.46-2018

KIM158
PAIR OF FERN SPRAY BROOCHES
Cartier Paris (founded 1847)
Platinum and diamonds
Paris, 1903
Cartier Collection, CL 114
A03

JAPANESE KNOT BROOCH
Cartier Paris (founded 1847)
Platinum, diamonds and
rubies
Paris, 1907
Cartier Collection, CL 23 A07

BROOCH
Cartier Paris (founded 1847)
Platinum and diamonds
Paris, 1907
Cartier Collection, CL 99
A07





KIM139
'MISS JOSÉ COLLINS AT DALY'S THEATRE'
The Sketch Supplement, 12 July 1916
 V&A

KIM141
WHITELEYS DEPARTMENT STORE WINDOW DISPLAY
Draper's Record, 17 April 1909
 British Library

trends and responded with a clear commercial strategy to sell and promote its goods overseas, both export kimono and the Japanese silk fabric used in kimono-inspired garments, which in turn fostered the fashion. The 'kimono craze' was also very much the consequence of mutual interaction between Japanese manufacturers and overseas dealers and retailers. Preserved in the Takashimaya Company Archive in Japan is a hand-painted sample book for export kimonos called *Kimono Designs for Foreigners* [*Gaijin Muke Kimono Zuan*], which dates to 1911. Next to one sample is a note: 'Order from Singleton & Co,' meaning it was an exclusive design for the British company Singleton, Benda & Co. Ltd, which dealt in Asian goods, including export kimono, and had offices in Yokohama, Kōbe and London.³¹ The garment shown is light green and indeed many export kimono were made in pale colours, such as the peach of Emilie Grigsby's garment, that were not prevalent in Japan. Takashimaya and others were responding very directly to foreign taste and to specific requests made by companies such as Singleton.

Trade statistics compiled by Japan's Ministry of Finance show that Britain was the main market for export kimono in the early twentieth century, the number of garments reaching a peak of 84,666 in 1910.³² This was the year of the Japan-British Exhibition, staged at White City in London, at which Takashimaya and other silk merchants mounted lavish displays.³³ After the First World

War the United States became the dominant importer. Curiously, the figures for kimono exports to France, whose fashion designers were most strongly influenced by Japan, are very low by comparison.³⁴ Not only was the number of kimono being sold in Britain and the United States rising, but the range of type and price was also increasing. Takashimaya's English-language export product catalogue, *Novelties in Japanese Articles*, published in 1911, shows a variety of export kimonos made of silk or cotton, embroidered or printed, in full, short or three-quarter length, and available lined or unlined. Prices range from 85 sen to 40 yen (the equivalent of approximately £7 to £300 today). Symbolic of luxury and taste, and associated with socialites such as Grigsby and actresses like José Collins, who appeared in popular magazines wearing kimono in their dressing rooms, the appeal of the garment grew ever wider (KIM139). Makers and retailers responded with cheaper garments of lower quality silk and less sophisticated patterning, thus democratizing the 'kimono craze'.³⁵

Mousmé, a novel about the marriage of a Japanese geisha and a British upper-class man published in Britain in 1901, suggests kimono were not always easy to find at this time. The male protagonist complains that 'though we searched the department through until our feet began to ache, there was no such thing as a kimono to be found.'³⁶ However, as the fashion for kimono grew, garments began to be sold at a growing number of department stores. In 1909, Whiteleys Department Store featured kimono prominently in their window display (KIM141). Harrods operated an Oriental Department that sold kimono until 1921, the peak of trade being between 1906 and 1914.³⁷ The overwhelming popularity of kimono was recorded by one Japanese traveller to London in 1910, who reported that 'I recognized so-called kimono on display not only in the West End, but also in many places in the city.'³⁸ In the United States, the Japanese art store A. A. Vantine and Co. in New York was well-known for selling kimono.³⁹ Cheap versions were also being manufactured in America and were made available throughout the country via mail order services, provided by department stores such as Sears, Roebuck and Company.⁴⁰

From the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the kimono was thus transformed from an exotic product into a very fashionable and widely accessible garment. This cannot be simply explained within the context of Orientalism, for this was not a case of one-directional cultural appropriation but one of mutual interaction between Japan and the wider world. As Shigemi Inaga has observed, a well-balanced combination of understandable similarity and exotic otherness is essential for indigenous products to achieve an international popularity.⁴¹ The 'kimono craze', and the development and marketing of kimono specifically made in Japan for export, are examples of a highly successful cross-cultural fashion translation, achieved through a perfect blend of the local and the global.

